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SUBJECT: GENERAL ABIZAID DISCUSSES REGIONAL SITUATION WITH KING, CROWN PRINCE, DEFENSE MINISTER

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Commander U.S. Central Command General Abizaid met with King Hamad, Crown Prince Salman, and Defense Minister Khalifa on September 27 to discuss Iraq and the upcoming elections there, the need for full Sunni participation in the election, Iranian interference in Iraq, and the situations in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The King stated that the United States had achieved its mission in Iraq and should pull its forces out of the country as soon as possible after the elections so that Iraqis could settle their differences themselves. In contrast with this view, the Crown Prince and Defense Minister both stressed the need for the U.S. to remain in Iraq until the security situation was stabilized. Regarding Sunni participation in the elections, the CP suggested the U.S. support the launch of a reconciliation campaign. All the General's interlocutors believed that Iran represents a great danger in Iraq and in the region. The Bahrainis stressed the value of the U.S.-Bahrain mil-mil relationship and look forward to strengthening the bilateral ties. They believe that Saudi Arabia is making progress in the fight against domestic militants. End Summary.

2. (C) In meetings September 27 with King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, and Defense Minister Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, Commander U.S. Central Command General Abizaid focused his discussions on the situation in Iraq and the upcoming elections there. He stated that the United States was committed to remaining in Iraq as long as necessary, but was working closely with the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) to appoint loyal senior military leaders so that Iraqis could take the lead in combating the insurgency. Abizaid pointed out the danger of Iranian meddling in Iraqi internal politics and the downsides of general Sunni intransigence and hesitation about participating in the elections. He emphasized continuing strong U.S. support for Bahrain and defense of the Kingdom.

Contrasting Advice on U.S. Forces in Iraq

3. (C) King Hamad stated that the United States had accomplished its objectives in Iraq, removing Saddam and settling the WMD issue, and it now should plan to depart Iraq as soon as possible following the Iraqi elections. He asserted that Iraqis were now relying upon the U.S. to settle their differences and offer solutions, thus absolving Iraqis themselves from any responsibility. This situation was unhealthy for both the U.S. and Iraq. The King acknowledged that Iraqis likely would fight each other following an American departure, but not for an extended period. He said that if they identified the right leaders, the country could move in the right direction. While division of the country was a possibility, this was a matter for Iraqis to decide. The United States could still maintain a robust presence in the region, with bases both inside Iraq and in other Gulf countries, and this would send the strong message that regional stability and development were strategic U.S. interests.

4. (C) In contrast with the King's comments, Crown Prince Salman and Defense Minister Khalifa strongly urged the United States to remain in Iraq for the foreseeable future. The CP said that the U.S. should offer comprehensive support for Iraq - military, economic, and political. He recommended that the U.S. engage with traditional local power structures, such as influential tribes in the rural areas. He suggested that the U.S. had lost an opportunity by disbanding the former Iraqi military. The U.S. now should be working closely with the IIG to appoint senior military leaders loyal to the new government. The Defense Minister said that the U.S. role was indispensable and that if it withdrew from Iraq now, there would be civil war the next day.

Iraqi Elections

15. (C) The King stressed that elections in Iraq should proceed as planned, saying "one delay will lead to another." He cautioned that Iraq is not ready for a "real democracy," and the results of completely open elections in Iraq would not be in the long-term interest of Iraq or the United States. In his view, Iraq can currently absorb some democracy, but commitment to true democratic ideals could take time.

16. (C) The Crown Prince said that the United States should support the development of a reconciliation program in Iraq to encourage Sunnis to participate in the elections. The message should focus on the future and what benefits the Sunnis would derive from full participation. Abizaid said that the intimidation power of the Baathists within the Sunni community was still very strong, and others were looking toward Zargawi. The Sunni community had a great opportunity to move forward, but it could find itself marginalized if they missed this chance. He warned that any Iraqi choosing to support Zargawi and his extremists would become a permanent enemy of the United States. Defense Minister Khalifa downplayed the significance of the threat posed by residents of the Sunni triangle, saying that Iran was ultimately a much more lethal danger.

Iranian Meddling In Iraq

17. (C) The three Bahraini leaders agreed that Iran represents a great danger in Iraq and the region. The Crown Prince said that Iran's ideology is that of "horribly inhumane terrorists" that has no future, resulting ultimately in "repulsing" people. The Defense Minister commented that the United States tends to see a difference between the IRGC and Khatemi, but in his view the two groups have a shared strategy, the only difference is in their tactics. Abizaid noted that Iran was playing a more active role in Iraq now than it did one year ago.

18. (C) The Crown Prince commented that Syria seemed to have no idea about what was happening on its border with Iraq. Abizaid indicated that Syria was playing a dangerous game in Iraq. There were indications that Syria was assisting the insurgents while the insurgents were cooperating with the extremists. If the Syrian government did not pay close enough attention, it might find itself dealing with a challenge from these same extremists at some point.

Bahrain As Regional Model

19. (C) The King emphasized that Bahrain was proud to host NAVCENT Headquarters and welcomed U.S. visitors to the Kingdom. Bahrain had implemented a number of political and economic reforms, and could serve as a model for other Gulf countries. When Bahraini citizens complain that the country is not moving in the right direction, the King replies that they have the option to run for office and argue their point of view. The King wants to develop institutions independent of any particular ideology or sect. He asserted that Bahrain would like to host a meeting of G8 and regional foreign ministers in January to discuss the Broader Middle East/North Africa Initiative. He commented that other Arabs had good words, but Bahrain had good deeds.

110. (C) In response to the General's question, the Crown Prince said Bahrain would prosecute the four terrorism suspects. The Ministry of Interior was working hard on the issue, though the Bahrain National Security Agency and the Attorney General's office needed to be improved. The CP noted that under current Bahraini law, the maximum penalty for conspiracy to commit a crime was three years, and the suspects deserved to remain in prison much longer than that. The new draft counter-terrorism law proposed significantly more severe penalties for conspiracy to carry out terrorist attacks. The Crown Prince mentioned that the suspect who fled the courtroom during his hearing in early September would face additional charges and would be held longer.

111. (C) The Crown Prince cited the strength of the U.S.-Bahrain bilateral relationship and recognized quick negotiation of the free trade agreement. He thanked the military for reopening the DOD Bahrain School. Noting that his children attend the school, he said he felt confident that it was safe and secure. He requested that the teachers be permitted to bring their families back to Bahrain.

Mil-Mil Cooperation

112. (C) Regarding military cooperation, Abizaid suggested that Bahrain develop a capability as a regional center for excellence, perhaps in simulator training. Defense Minister

Al Khalifa replied that the simulator project was on the right track but he was not yet ready for a purchase. Abizaïd noted that the U.S. was working with Jordan to establish a special forces training center, and the Minister stated that Bahrain holds annual joint special forces exercises with Jordan and the two sides benefit from the interaction.

13. (C) The Defense Minister expressed great concern about Iranian ballistic missile developments. Though the Shahab missile is not accurate, its range, combined with Iran's focus on a nuclear program, was disturbing. He said Iran is desperate to have a nuclear weapon, and there needed to be plans to ensure they do not get it. Abizaïd responded that all options were on the table in dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat. The United States wanted to work with Gulf countries to develop a regional ballistic missile defense system.

Saudi Arabia Fighting Hard

14. (C) Regarding Saudi Arabia, the King said that the government was fighting the terrorists to the best of its ability. It had waited too long to recognize the threat but was now dealing with it seriously. The Defense Minister indicated that Bahrain and Saudi Arabia enjoy excellent cooperation at the border and are developing closer links for sharing information. Abizaïd told the Crown Prince that many of the foreign fighters and suicide bombers in Iraq were Saudi. He worried that as the security situation in Iraq stabilized, the Saudis would return to their country and might cause trouble there.

ZIADEH